

## The Truth About the Crusades

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Robert Louis Wilken, a board member and frequent contributor of First Things, has a review in the Wall Street Journal of two new books on the Crusades:

The recorded past and the remembered past are seldom the same. Nowhere is this more evident than with the Crusades. The Crusades were a belated counter-offensive of Western Christians to come to the aid of Christians of the East in defending their lands against the further expansion of Islam and to free the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim rule. In the year 600 most of the Middle East, from present-day Turkey to Iraq, including Egypt and the southern Mediterranean coast, was Christian, and its principal cities—including Alexandria, Antioch, Damascus and Jerusalem—were vibrant centers of Christian life and culture. Within a century the entire region came under Muslim rule.

[. . .]

So deep is the new paradigm—the Crusades as Western Christian aggression, not a defensive movement of Christian piety—that the writings of mere historians can do little to undo the damage. Jonathan Riley Smith, a distinguished historian of the Crusades, once said that he had given up hope that scholarly writing could make a difference.

Related: Wilken also wrote an essay on “Christianity Face to Face with Islam”, adapted from his 2008 Erasmus Lecture, for the January 2009 edition of First Things.